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SUBJECT: The "Masa" as a Political Force

REF: A. Manila 1401 B. Manila 1195

- C. 04 Manila 3484

1. (SBU) Summary: The underprivileged and impoverished "masa" remains a potentially significant but largely unorganized political force. The once-influential Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino (PMP) party of former President Estrada has claimed success in renewing the party's membership and effectiveness through new outreach programs for the urban poor. Leftist parties, many associated with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), have representatives in Congress under the "party-list" system and trumpet public victories in representing "masa" concerns, which focus on job scarcity, rising inflation, and feelings of inaction by the government to assist the poor. Some religious groups reach out to this audience as well. The "masa" appears to view the U.S. presence in the Philippines as generally favorable, while wishing for even more assistance. Despite the enduring appeal of the Communist Party of the Philippines and other leftist groups, this unfortunate group will likely remain politically marginal, especially with so many of its potential leaders heading off every year as Overseas Filipino Workers. End Summary.

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Who are they?  
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2. (U) The popular appeal of actor Fernando Poe Jr. (FPJ) in the May 2004 Presidential elections -- which many Filipinos of all classes continue to believe he won, only to be "cheated" out of it by the Arroyo administration -- underscored the potential power of the "masa," the millions of underprivileged and impoverished Filipinos that make up nearly 75 percent of the voting population. This group voted together as a bloc in 1998 in the successful campaign of President Joseph Estrada, another popular former actor. They were the core of the unsuccessful "EDSA 3" people power movement opposed to the removal of Estrada in May 2001. Significantly, however, it was Manila's middle class and not the "masa" fueling both the successful 1986 "EDSA 1" people power that drove Ferdinand Marcos out of power and the "EDSA 2" movement that led to Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's assumption of the presidency in January 2001.

3. (U) President Arroyo, in her own 2004 campaign, sought to appeal to the "masa" with what she called a "pro-poor" political agenda. In her "10-point plan," she notably included programs meant to benefit the "masa:" job creation, educational investment, and the provision of power to every neighborhood in the Philippines. However, Arroyo's popularity among the "masa" has fallen steadily. In a March 30 national survey by Pulse Asia, Arroyo scored an average 39 percent approval rating among the "masa," a full 17 percentage points below her June 2004 rating and her lowest rating since she became President.

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Political Party of the Urban Poor  
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4. (SBU) The Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino (Force of the Filipino Masses, or PMP) was Estrada's main political force in winning the 1998 election, with a claimed card-carrying membership of over four million, mostly from Metro Manila. However, according to PMP political affairs adviser Rolando Ramirez and PMP Secretary General Horatio "Boy" Morales, shortly after the 1998 victory, Estrada lost interest in building the PMP as an institution and it quickly lost influence. While partially re-vitalized in the "EDSA 3" uprising, PMP's ability effectively to mobilize mass numbers of supporters was constrained by what Morales admitted was "ineffectual party leadership at the municipal and neighborhood levels."

5. (SBU) Morales and Ramirez claimed in a discussion with poloff that the current PMP Secretariat, with Estrada still acting as party President despite his house arrest, had now changed course and was again focused on recruiting and developing leaders in a drive to professionalize the party. Ramirez admitted that membership levels had dipped since 1998, but predicted that the recent recruitment of 17 new,

activist Manila chapter coordinators for the various municipalities in Metro Manila would reinvigorate the party.

16. (SBU) Ramirez cited as recent PMP successes an April 15 conference in Rizal province, which drew almost 200 participants, and a March 2005 national PMP conference for over 500 mid-level party organizers from not only Manila but also from Bulacan, Cavite, Rizal, and Laguna provinces. Beyond cultivating Manila and central Luzon's provincial coordinators, the PMP next hopes next to revive virtually moribund PMP offices in more far-flung provinces, according to these PMP officials.

17. (SBU) PMP's current operational plan is to create a network among the urban poor that engages with the "masa" and provides a variety of self-help livelihood programs to address the main problem -- scarcity of work -- based on the Filipino concept of "bayanihan" or self-reliance. In order words, the PMP officials explained, PMP hopes to position itself as a party that helps the "masa" to help themselves. Morales added that the PMP wants ordinary people to see the PMP as a "solution provider." When asked how the PMP managed its relations with other political parties like Bayan Muna (see para 8) that also seek to represent the underprivileged, Morales -- a former member of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) -- said that the PMP saw room for "tactical alliances but not strategic. We don't think Bayan Muna and friends know how to solve the problems facing us."

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Competition for the Poor  
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18. (U) Leftist parties, many associated with the CPP, have trumpeted public victories in representing "masa" concerns. Bayan Muna (BM) is pre-eminent, with three seats in Congress, having drawn over 1.2 million nationwide votes in the May 2004 election. (Note: The 1987 Constitution provided for a limited number of "party-list representatives" who do not represent geographical constituencies. End note) Analysts have also credited BM with helping fellow CPP-related party-list groups elect three additional members to the House: Anakpawis obtained two seats, and Gabriela one. Although none was willing to provide Embassy with membership information, these three CPP-related parties collectively garnered over two million votes in the May 2004 election.

19. (U) Another leftist party-list group -- Akbayan -- has disassociated itself from both Bayan Muna and the CPP. It reportedly has 87,000 members and several active grassroots outreach programs to encourage disadvantaged citizens to demand basic public services and land rights. Akbayan received nearly one million votes in 2004 and now has three Congressional representatives, most notably Rep. Loretta Rosales, who has sponsored human rights and land reform legislation aimed at curbing violence and land disputes in the rural areas. She has also been a strong supporter of anti-TIP efforts and played a key role in the founding of a new Philippine Myanmar Parliamentary Caucus to highlight human rights abuses in Burma and call for ASEAN to ensure Burma does not become ASEAN chair in 2006.

10. (U) BM representatives in particular recently were active in supporting a national transport strike on April 18. In a press interview, BM Representative Teodoro Casino accused major oil companies of operating as a "cartel" and called on the GRP to scrap the Oil Deregulation Law passed in 1998 in order to protect "masa" consumers hurt by inflationary pressures. Additionally, media reports of the one-day national strike indicated militant union Kilosang Mayo Uno (KMU) -- also CPP-related -- helped support many chapters of the 500,000 member PISTON transport worker's union (Pinagkaisang Samahan ng Tsuper at Operator Nationwide), which was the primary union that led the strike. BM's organizing activities have continued despite a series of killings of leftist activists, in what leftist leaders have called a "systematic campaign" by armed elements in the GRP (ref a).

11. (SBU) According to Joel Rocamora from the Institute of Popular Democracy (IPD), demographic trends favored continued growth of the "masa," but in many respects engaging many underprivileged sectors in domestic political activity was now more difficult because of the opportunities to become Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW). While acknowledging efforts by party-list groups in particular to politicize OFW issues among the "masa," Rocamora lamented that many erstwhile grassroots "masa" organizers were themselves instead earning their living abroad as OFWs. Leftist groups sponsored numerous demonstrations and media campaigns during the July 2004 Filipino-Iraq hostage crisis that highlighted the plight of low-paid OFWs. In a March 17 rally, another small party related to the CPP-- Migrante -- again tried, unsuccessfully, to mobilize large crowds on

behalf of yet another Filipino-Iraq hostage issue (refs b and c).

12. (U) Religious groups also reach out to elements of the "masa." Influential Manila Archbishop Guadencio Rosales has recently promoted the national "Pondo ng Pinoy" - "Fund for the Filipino" -- program, which calls on all Catholics to donate 25 centavos (less than a penny) to support livelihood projects for impoverished Filipinos. Money collected is funneled into micro-lending programs run by the Church or affiliated NGOs. Since its launch in June 2004, this fund has raised about USD 300,000. Archbishop Rosales has been less of a public political advocate than predecessor Jaime Cardinal Sin, whose outspoken views gave strong impetus to the EDSA 1 movement in 1986.

13. (U) The Protestant "Jesus Is Lord" (JIL) movement, led by Brother Eddie Villanueva, provided thousands of pro-Arroyo demonstrators and mass media coverage of the EDSA 2 event. However, Villanueva ran against Arroyo in the 2004 presidential race and drew large crowds during the campaign -- if not on election day -- with a focus on alleged corruption in the Arroyo administration and complaints about injustice for the common Filipino. The powerful Christian group Iglesia Ni Cristo (INC), a strong supporter of former president Estrada, was instrumental in mobilizing street protesters and using radio and television to energize many "masa" and other supporters during the EDSA 3 event in May 2001.

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From the Mouths of the "Masa"  
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14. (U) Recent informal, non-scientificallly chosen discussions on the street in Metro Manila revealed common "masa" concerns including lack of jobs, rising cost of living, and feelings that the GRP had failed effectively to assist the poor. A general consensus unfavorably contrasted President Arroyo as a leader who does not care about the "masa" as opposed to former presidents Estrada and Ferdinand Marcos as "good" leaders who did. Some bemoaned what they said was the current administration's opposition to wage increases despite increasing inflation. Many complained about land titling problems, which they blamed on a government that they said did not deal decisively with pressing issues among the poor. (Note: Most of these may have been actual squatters who had no right to land titles under current law. End note.) Several mentioned corruption in the bureaucracy as the principal reason for their distrust of politicians. Others accepted some blame for their plight, while calling for a strong disciplinarian as President who would advocate a more rigorous work ethic, along with better livelihood programs. Most expressed special concern about what they viewed as rising crime in urban poor areas, while at the same time admitting that many families actually encouraged their own children to steal in order to be able to eat.

15. (U) Views toward the U.S. and its role in the Philippines were generally positive. Of special mention were favorable memories of U.S. assistance in fighting the Japanese in World War II. Others were more non-committal, saying the U.S. "wasn't doing anything to harm us." One respondent, however, complained that President Arroyo "nods her head when it comes to the USG." A few criticized the U.S. for "not helping poor people" in the Philippines. Many observers have noted, however, that a huge majority of Filipinos -- especially among the bottom layers of society -- would likely favor a return of U.S. bases if ever the choice were put to a referendum.

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Comment  
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16. (SBU) The "masa" have the numbers, but poverty and lack of education are constraints upon translating this into effective political representation and power. The extent of poverty and poor governance helps explain the enduring appeal of the CPP as well as newer leftist groups. But, as the IPD's Rocamora noted, "until now, the masa has shown the capacity to bring down a government, but not to build up a government." The export of OFWs provides an enormous political-economic safety valve for the Philippines; not only by providing needed hard currency for the domestic economy, but also by exporting large numbers of ambitious individuals from the "masa" who might otherwise combine to force acute social-economic issues such as persistent poverty and unemployment to the political front burner and to take a pre-dominant political role against the entrenched elite.